

1.1 STATEMENT OF PROJECT PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of this project is to identify the preferred corridor for eventual construction of a multilane facility that meets future transportation and safety needs for United States Highway (US) 8. The project corridor begins at WIS 35 (N) in Polk County and extends approximately 40 miles (64 km) to US 53 in Barron County. Figure 1.1-1 shows the location of the project. Because of the lengthy project corridor, it has been divided into individual segments for study. Each segment has one or more alternatives. The segments and alternatives are identified in Section 2 Alternatives. The overall “preferred alternative” corridor selected will be a combination of preferred segment alternatives. A preferred alternative that satisfies the project purpose and need will then be preserved until the proposed long-range improvements are warranted. To satisfy the purpose of this project, the future US 8 improvement alternative should create a transportation system that complements and supports planned land uses and transportation systems and preserves highway mobility on the corridor. The transportation corridor must be consistent with the national, state, regional, and local importance of US 8 and avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts.

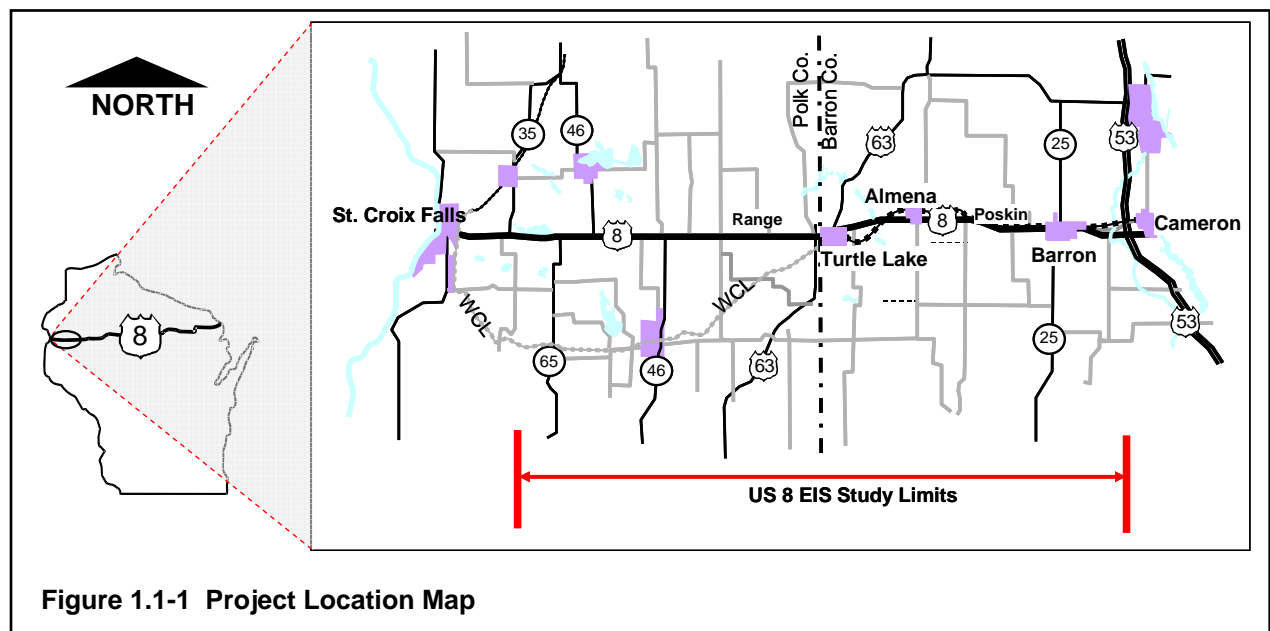


Figure 1.1-1 Project Location Map

1.1.1 Tier Concepts

A tiered approach is used to provide identification of a preferred corridor and the transportation solutions to address both immediate and long-term needs. This document, a Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), is the first step in the approach to the environmental documentation and ultimate construction of a multilane facility for US 8. The approach is made up of three tiers with the limits and goals of each tier defined below.

- Tier 1 (this EIS) gains consensus on the basic location and design vision for the overall corridor. Tier 1 identifies where relocations will occur and the ultimate design standards for the proposed facility, but does so within a broad corridor width that provides flexibility for future detailed engineering. Tier 1 is not intended to provide detailed engineering to a level that identifies the new corridor centerline, or right-of-way limits, or high-accuracy construction cost estimates.
- Tier 2 (future) would include formal corridor preservation efforts for segments of the preferred corridor on existing alignment and segments located on a new alignment:
 - For segments located on existing alignment, collaboration with local transportation system plans and comprehensive plans would occur. Elements of these plans could include such things as appropriate land use and balance, building setbacks, access management strategies, proper intersection spacing, roadway functionality, and enhanced local circulation. WisDOT could designate access control measures through Wis. Stat. 84.25 or through a

- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) access agreement after collaboration with local jurisdictions.
- For segments of the preferred corridor located on a new alignment, WisDOT could officially designate and map more explicit corridor plans for the ultimate multilane facility. An example of this would be to apply Wisconsin State Statutes (Wis. Stat. 84.295) to designate and map those segments where relocated expressway or freeway routes are being proposed. This would ensure that the future viability of such corridors would be preserved and not be left unprotected against future growth and development.
 - Tier 3 (future) would include efforts to advance the proposed corridor design engineering to a level necessary for inclusion into a State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) or for enumeration for construction as a Major highway project¹. The State Transportation Projects Commission (TPC)² evaluates the merits of potential Major projects. The TPC's recommendation is needed before a Major project can be presented to the Governor and Legislature for statutory enumeration. Enumeration by the Legislature is required to fund and construct a Major highway project. Tier 3 efforts could involve any one or a number of corridor segments depending on conditions and available funding.
 - Tiers 2 or 3 would include additional environmental documentation in the form of a second tier Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment, depending on the corridor segment location and extent of the proposed improvement.
 - Both Tier 2 and Tier 3 would require substantial investment to obtain detailed terrain information and perform engineering (up to 60 percent design completion) to define both centerline and right-of-way limits to more or less final locations. Tier 2 and Tier 3 efforts would also provide a higher degree of confidence by establishing construction cost estimates to the required high level accuracy.

The ultimate completion of 40 miles (64 km) of a multilane facility will require some Major highway project enumeration and will likely take decades to fund and complete. See Section 2.6 (Preliminary WisDOT-Recommended Alternatives) for additional detail on future tier activities for US 8.

1.1.2 Project Need

This section provides an overview of the project need. More detailed discussion is included in Section 1.3 Project Need. The US 8 project is needed because:

- **US 8 is a route of national, state, regional, and local importance.** US 8 is included in the National Highway System (NHS) and is designated as a Connector Route in the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's (WisDOT) Corridors 2020 plan. The objectives of the plan strive to ensure that Corridors 2020 connector routes have adequate capacity and provide adequate level of service (LOS). As a federal and state truck route, US 8 is used for the transport of goods and services and provides communities along the corridor with access to local and regional services. As a major east-west corridor in northwest Wisconsin, US 8 is also an important tourist and recreation route.

US 8 passes through the central areas of Polk and Barron counties, connecting the metropolitan area of the Twin Cities with northern Wisconsin. US 8 provides a direct connection to US 53, US 63, Wisconsin State Trunk Highway (WIS) 35, WIS 25, WIS 65, and WIS 46. US 8 also provides

¹ By statute, a "Major highway project" denotes a project that has a total cost over \$5 million and involves any of the following: constructing a new highway 2.5 miles (4 km) or more in length; reconstructing or reconditioning an existing highway by either relocating 2.5 miles (4 km) or more of the existing highway, adding one or more lanes five miles or more in length to the existing highway, or improving to freeway standards 10 miles or more of existing divided highway having two or more lanes in either direction.

² The TPC is made up of fifteen members including the Governor, three citizen members appointed by the Governor, five senators and five representatives appointed by the Legislature, and the Secretary of Transportation as a non-voting member.

regional linkage and access for trade and metropolitan services as far west as Minneapolis, Minnesota and as far south as Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Within the project limits, US 8 links the communities of St. Croix Falls, Range, Poskin, Villages of Turtle Lake and Almena, and City of Barron. US 8 provides mobility to residents, industry, farmers, and businesses within the study area serving as a direct link to the adjacent communities. Its role as the main east-west corridor in Polk and Barron Counties brings local and regional traffic to these communities.

- **Long-term planning and corridor preservation are needed.** The growth of adjacent communities has, and will continue to place both additional traffic and demand on the US 8 corridor. In its current condition, there are numerous substandard roadway items on the facility. These substandard roadway items may not be causing immediate operational or safety problems. Over time, however, the increase in traffic and demand will place additional strain on these substandard items and ultimately create both operational and safety problems. Once this occurs, the resulting deficiencies will need to be corrected. It is essential that long-term planning for the US 8 corridor occur in advance of these deficiencies. With this long-term plan in place, incremental improvements can be programmed and constructed as the deficiencies occur. The long-term plan for US 8 should be considered in the local comprehensive planning efforts of the communities along the corridor. This approach will ensure that the US 8 corridor is managed in such a manner that is consistent with the long-term plan. The long-term plan for US 8 should be considered in the local comprehensive planning efforts of the communities along the corridor. Considerations for local planning efforts should consider not only improvements along the existing corridor, but the location of bypass corridors and the relationship of those corridors to the local transportation system and land planned land uses.

Corridor preservation is especially relevant in the case of US 8 and its “tiered” EIS approach. The primary goal of this Tier 1 EIS is to obtain concurrence on the general location, facility type, and function of the corridor. Funding and construction for the long-term vision of the US 8 corridor is not on the immediate horizon. Because of this, years or perhaps even decades may pass before actual improvements are realized. The long-term preservation of the US 8 corridor in the interim becomes imperative and is one of the primary purposes of this tiered EIS.

- **Future traffic volumes indicate a need for additional capacity.** Current traffic volumes on US 8 in the rural areas range from 6,370 to 10,950 average daily traffic (ADT). Projected traffic volumes in the year 2030 are expected to range from 9,900 to 14,800 ADT for these same areas. As traffic volumes increase, the ability for traffic on side roads to access or cross US 8 will become increasingly difficult. When traffic volumes on a rural 2020 Connector Route reach 8,700 ADT WisDOT standards indicate capacity improvements may be needed. Standards allow the threshold to be raised to 12,000 ADT when the addition of passing lanes will provide effective service. As traffic volumes increase above the levels that define what is appropriate for a Corridors 2020 connector route, capacity expansion will be needed.
- **Improvements are needed to correct substandard roadway items.** Substandard roadway items along US 8 include inadequate stopping sight distance on vertical curves at over 24 locations, horizontal curves with superelevation that exceed the maximum of six percent, and substandard shoulder width in one segment. Improvements are also desired where access points exceed WisDOT’s Facilities Development Manual (FDM) guidelines, particularly in the Barron, Poskin, Range, and the Deer Lake areas.
- **Crash rates are high in urban areas.** From 1996-2000 crashes were above the statewide urban average in two of the five years in the village of Turtle Lake while in the city of Barron, crashes were above the statewide urban average in four of the five years. Within the five-year period, there were five crashes involving pedestrians in Barron; one resulted in a pedestrian fatality. Many of the crashes within these communities can be attributed to side-street drivers taking risks when there are insufficient gaps in US 8 traffic, and the lack of turn lanes.

- **Legislative mandate and public input.** The State Legislature enumerated funds for a US 8 study in 2001. A corridor study of this scale requires an EIS. The mandate for the corridor study was a result of input by the US 8 Coalition, a group of county and local officials formed in the mid-1990s to communicate concerns about safety and congestion along the corridor. Public support has been high for improvements that address congestion, safe access to and from US 8, and mobility for both local and regional traffic.